

Message Text

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12

ACTION EA-09

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FM AMCONSUL HONG KONG

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8511

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

AMEMBASSY TAIPEI

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

USLO PEKING

USUN NEW YORK 919

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

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CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR UR CH

SUBJ: CHINA RELEASES DETAINED SOVIET HELICOPTER AND CREW

1. IN A POLITICAL GESTURE TO THE SOVIETS, THE CHINESE HAVE REVERSED THEIR STANCE, LIFTED THEIR HERETOFORE LID OF SILENCE ON THE CASE, AND ANNOUNCED THE DECISION TO RELEASE THE SOVIET HELICOPTER AND CREW THAT HAS BEEN DETAINED BY PRC AUTHORITIES SINCE MARCH, 1974.

2. WHEN THE INCIDENT OCCURRED IN 1974, A MARCH 23 PRC FONMIN PROTEST NOTE TO THE SOVIET EMBASSY IN PEKING REJECTED SOVIET ALLEGATIONS THAT THE MI-4 HELICOPTER HAD "UNINTENTIONALLY" ENTERED CHINESE TERRITORY WHILE ON A "FIRST AID" MISSION. THE NOTE CHARGED THAT THE HELICOPTER

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HAD BEEN ENGAGED IN ESPIONAGE AND DISRUPTIVE ACTIVITIES

AND CONTENDED THAT "DOCUMENTS FOUND ON BOARD" AND THE ACTIVITIES OF THE THREE MILITARY PERSONNEL PROVED THAT THEY WERE INSTRUCTED TO CARRY OUT A "SPECIAL MISSION." ACCORDING TO THE NOTE, THE CHINESE HAD ALREADY CARRIED OUT A "THOROUGH INVESTIGATION." IT STATED THAT "WITH THE CULPRITS AND MATERIAL EVIDENCE AT HAND, THE CASE IS CONCLUSIVE" AND ADDED THAT "IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES TO SHIRK THEIR CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY OF SENDING THIS HELICOPTER TO INTRUDE INTO CHINA FOR ESPIONAGE."

3. AFTER A BRIEF FLURRY OF ANTI-SOVIET RALLIES IN SINKIANG WHERE THE INCIDENT OCCURRED AND PUBLICATION OF THE NOTE, THE CHINESE CLAMPED A TIGHT LID OF PUBLIC SILENCE OVER THE CASE. PRIVATELY, HOWEVER, PRC OFFICIALS CONTINUED TO CHARGE THAT THE HELICOPTER AND CREW HAD BEEN ENGAGED IN ESPIONAGE ACTIVITIES. CHINESE OFFICIALS NOT ONLY REJECTED SOVIET DEMANDS FOR THE RETURN OF THE CREW AND HELICOPTER, BUT ALSO REFUSED THEIR REQUESTS TO SEE THE MEN.

4. THE DECEMBER 27 NCNA REPORT STRIKES A RATHER DEFENSIVE NOTE, STATING THAT THE DETENTION OF THE CREW WAS "NECESSARY" BUT ADDING "THINGS ARE CLEAR AFTER INVESTIGATION BY THE CHINESE PUBLIC SECURITY ORGANS AND THEY CONSIDER CREDIBLE THE SOVIET CREW MEMBERS' STATEMENT ABOUT THE UNINTENTIONAL FLIGHT INTO CHINA." NEVERTHELESS, THE NCNA REPORT CONTINUES TO DESCRIBE THE HELICOPTER AS AN "ARMED RECONNAISSANCE" AIRCRAFT AND POINTED OUT THAT THE INCIDENT TOOK PLACE SOME 70 KILOMETERS INTO CHINA'S TERRITORY. FINALLY, THE REPORTS NOTES THAT THE FONMIN OFFICIALS FETTERED THE CREW PRIOR TO THEIR DEPARTURE FOR HOME.

5. COMMENT: OBSERVERS IN HONG KONG, INCLUDING OURSELVES, ARE STILL SCRATCHING THEIR HEADS OVER PEKING'S NEAR VOLTE FACE ON THE HELICOPTER PILOTS. IT MUST BE SEEN AS A SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL GESTURE, BUT NCNA, SINCE THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE RELEASE, HAS CONTINUED HAMMERING AWAY AT SOVIET ACTIONS IN ANGOLA AND ON THE THREAT OF A THIRD WORLD WAR. IT MAY BE SIGNIFICANT THAT THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PRC ANNOUNCED ACCEPTANCE OF THE CREW MEMBERS' STATEMENTS AS DISTINCT FROM ANY EARLIER CLAIMS BY THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT. CONCEIVABLY THIS COULD ENABLE PEKING TO MAKE THE GESTURE WHILE LEAVING MOSCOW IN DOUBT ABOUT WHAT OTHER ADMISSIONS MIGHT BE CONTAINED IN THE STATEMENT.

5. GIVEN THE TIMING OF THE MOVE, COMING SHORTLY AFTER PRESIDENT FORD'S PEKING VISIT, THE PRC MAY ALSO BE ATTEMPTING

TO POINT OUT THAT IT CANNOT BE EXCLUDED FROM THE GAME OF
TRIANGULAR POLITICS. IN THIS CONNECTION, IT IS JUST
POSSIBLE THAT THE GESTURE WAS MADE WITH THE UPCOMING
SOVIET PARTY CONGRESS IN MIND. END COMMENT.
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